

**No Butts About It, Kids;  
Smoking Is So Not Cool**  
May 28, 1998

**The Los Angeles Times**

By Scott Harris

WASHINGTON -- There was a time when Kool was cool.

The time was, and is, those teenage years, and actually just about any brand would do. The tobacco industry's least favorite congressman can attest to this. Henry Waxman was 16 when he first indulged, hated it, and then toiled to acquire the taste.

"It was a sign of being a cool guy," Waxman recalls more than 40 years later. "And I needed any help I could get to convince myself I was a cool guy."

What was true when Waxman was a teenager--and also when my ninth-grade football teammate, not just cool, but the quarterback, offered me my first smoke--is true today. Hordes of insecure teenagers see cachet in the cigarette, an antidote to awkwardness. Perhaps it's even trendier now, what with grown-ups like Waxman around.

And now America faces a classic dilemma: How to make tobacco both forbidden and uncool? How best to address the adolescent instinct for rebellion?

Those were questions I'd come to ask Waxman, a former two-pack-a-day man who has probably done more than any other single politician to change America's attitudes about tobacco.

On the cab ride to Capitol Hill, I saw this front-page headline in the Washington Times: "Cigarette Taxes Spur Black Market." Oh, yes--that dilemma too. So will raising tobacco taxes to discourage teen smoking not only backfire but also stoke an illicit market to serve teens?

This was last Friday after plenty of Senate debate over proposed cigarette taxes designed to both discourage teen smoking and raise money for health and anti-smoking legislation. Waxman was disappointed by the defeat of an attempt to raise cigarette taxes by \$ 1.50 per pack--40 cents more than the amount sought in sweeping tobacco legislation by Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.).

\*\*\*\*

To Waxman, it was particularly troubling that California Sen. Dianne Feinstein, who voted with the opposition, was considering joining Sen. Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah) in introducing a bill that would trim the proposed tax to 80 cents. The reason, Feinstein says, was her concern about the potential impact of tobacco smuggling on California.

"To me it was really disappointing," Waxman says. "I can't understand her reasoning."

Waxman, whose district covers most of the Westside and reaches into Sherman Oaks and Studio City, hastened to add that he was disappointed with himself--that he should have lobbied Feinstein more ardently.

To Waxman, fears that tougher regulation of tobacco would actually encourage teen use and create a black market smack of another smoke-screen from Big Tobacco. Yes, some teens may be turned on by

the taboo, and yes, a tax may foster some illicit trade. But the benefits, Waxman argues, should easily outweigh the potential problems.

"We know something: Higher prices discourage consumption," he argues. "When kids start to smoke, if they can't afford to buy regularly, they may not become addicted. And they may discover that's not how they want to spend their money."

The specter of a black market is, to Waxman, a secondary issue. If it emerges as a major problem, he says, "then you figure out how to deal with this issue." The first priority is to keep masses of young people from getting hooked--to make smoking rare rather than commonplace. Do that and the incentive for smuggling dries up.

And here Waxman pushes a novel strategy that is not now part of the plea bargains negotiated by Big Tobacco with the state or the federal legislation under consideration: A carrot-and-stick program that would make each tobacco company responsible for, in effect, unmarketing its product to America's youth.

"They're smart enough to get kids to smoke," he says. "So they can use some of that brilliance to get kids not to smoke."

What Waxman has in mind is something akin to the performance standards, or "look backs," that were part of the Clean Air Act of 1990, legislation that helped reduce smog in Greater Los Angeles and elsewhere. That law, written by Waxman, threatened to push big oil companies out of the big urban markets if they failed to reduce pollutants in their gasoline by 25%--a potential loss of billions in revenue.

"Well," he adds: "They all did it."

\*\*\*\*

Waxman envisions a system under which teen smoking would be measured, brand by brand. R.J. Reynolds, Philip Morris and other companies would assume individual per-pack levies according to the success or failure of their efforts to keep young people off nicotine. Those who succeeded would wind up with a competitive advantage.

The absence of such a strategy "is so frustrating to me," he says. "I think the idea of performance standards is key to making this work."

Waxman, never one to underestimate in the tobacco wars, may be on to something. How would a brand called UnKool sell? If Joe Camel were a nerd, would that help?

My only wish is that more teens had my experience. There were four of us walking home from school. We hid at a construction site and Kelly, our quarterback, brought out the smokes. I accepted the offer and puffed as if I knew what I was doing.

Kelly stared at me. "Try inhaling," he said. "I am," I said. Then Kelly opened his mouth to show a cloud of smoke and sucked it into his lungs. So I tried that--and reacted with a painful coughing fit. Kelly laughed and it added to my growing opinion that he wasn't such a cool guy after all. I never did take up the habit.

\*\*\*\*

I knew another guy back then, still a true friend, who called cigarettes "cancer sticks" and loathed the pollution left by his mother's bridge club. Brien was a straight-A student and a distance runner then. Now he's a parent whose two kids are fast on their way to adolescence.

My friend is grateful that Amy and Jason got to know their maternal grandfather when they did, when he traveled everywhere with bottled oxygen, slowly dying from emphysema caused by decades of heavy smoking. That should have made a lasting impression, Brien figures, hoping that Amy and Jason understand there's nothing cool about disease and its causes.